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1956

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"The Apple Cart"

The New York Times

October 19, 1956

Theatre: 'Apple Cart'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

NOT for the first time, Bernard Shaw has contrived to rescue Broadway from mediocrity. The Maurice Evans production of "The Apple Cart," which opened at the Plymouth last evening, is comedy on the adult level by a master of words.

Although it was first done here twenty-six years ago, it is more contemporary or topical than anything put on so far this year. In the first act, it almost seems as though Shaw had written "The Apple Cart" for the election year of 1956. "Do you think this prosperity is safe?" King Magnus inquires of his Prime Minister.

Although everybody in Shaw's England, dated ambiguously in "the future," is well-fed, well-paid and surfeited with goods, King Magnus is not certain that everything is ideal. "The Apple Cart" has not grown old, although the man with the beard who first attended it has now disappeared.

•

But let's not insist on the current validity of everything Shaw said more than a quarter of a century ago. For he had his heresies, too, and his infatuation with "the strong man" in government seems less like one of his crotchets than it did originally. Intellectually, we may have grown up to "The Apple Cart" in twenty-six years, but in some respects we have left "The Apple Cart" behind.

Although it is an amusing play, sometimes it is also moving. For it is the work of a writer who could communicate his love of mankind and his devotion to its welfare through the use of words; and there are passages in "The Apple Cart" that are suddenly affecting. Take King Magnus' speech about the function of the monarch in a squalid world. It comes after a long, ironic give-and-take about politicians, democracy and the smallness of men in the face of large issues. In the midst of the merriment Shaw introduces some wisdom.

All at once the audience knows that it has come out of the glitter into the presence of the gold.

Mr. Evans reads this kindly speech with clarity and patience; and George Schaefer, the director, has staged the scene skillfully. This is a superb, sobering moment in the first act of a singularly jaunty comedy.

As usual, Mr. Evans comes to town with a meticulous and thoroughly enjoyable production. Robert O'Hearn's palace settings are amusingly grand, and Noel Taylor's regal costumes help to keep the spectacle lively.

Everything about the performance is clear. Mr. Schaefer and Mr. Evans have, as always, given the audience first consideration. The shape of the performance is symmetrical, and the dialogue can be understood. In the part of King Magnus, Mr. Evans is at the top of his form. His royalty is seasoned with humor and personal amiability. The iconoclasm is never cheap or familiar.

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And the entire cast is up to the standard. In the raffish part of the King's mistress, the beautiful Signe Hasso gives a rollicking, light-footed performance that is highly entertaining and avoids the low comedy style. Charles Carson is the perfect prime minister—forceful, and decisive and comic without loss of dignity. As the bumptious trade union cabinet minister. Mercer McLeod gives a capitally funny performance.

Pat Nye as the powermistress of England's future state is especially effective with one impassioned speech about the holiness of her government function to the well-being of the state. And Raymond Bramley's grinning, self-assured and obtuse American Ambassador is a caricature in the best Shavian vein.

At last, a mind has appeared in this lamentable Broadway season, and a number of pertinent things have been said impertinently by a man who knew how to use the language. Although Shaw has left us, the mind remains—alert, full and radiant. "The Apple Cart" is gratefully received.

"THE APPLE CART"

Comedy by George Bernard Shaw; staged by George Schaefer; scenery and lighting by Robert O'Hearn; costumes by Noel Taylor; revived by Charles Adams and Joseph Neebe at the Plymouth Theatre, October 18, 1956. The cast:

Pamphilius.....Norman Barrs
Sempronius.....George Turner
Bill Boanerges..Mercer McLeod
King Magnus....Maurice Evans
Princess Alice..Patience Cleveland
Balbus.....Guy Spaull
Nicobar.....Jack Livesey
Crassus.....Noel Leslie
Pliny.....William Jackson
Joseph Proteus..Charles Carson
Lysistrata.....Pat Nye
Amanda.....Claudia Morgan
Orinthia.....Signe Hasso
Queen Jemima..Katherine Hynes
Vanhattan.....Raymond Bramley

Daily Mirror

October 19, 1956

Robert Coleman's THEATRE:

'The Apple Cart' Is Provocative, Witty

• Shaw was talkative but what he had to say is exciting, informative.

Back in 1929 G. B. Shaw, the Peck's Bad Boy of the playwrights, upset Britain's apple cart with a comedy aptly called "The Apple Cart." The Colonel Blimps fairly leaped from their cozy club chairs in anger because he applied the slapstick to big business and its methods.

But their sense of outrage paled beside that of the Laborites. For here was their old Fabian Socialist buddy putting in a good word for intelligent monarchy, and tossing a few jibes at democracy. Here was Shaw: the unpredictable, turning flip-flops like an acrobat at the Palladium.

• • •

WHAT ALL HAD forgotten was that Shaw was a Sophist at heart. That he embodied the best and worst qualities of that school. He would take either side in an argument, as long as it put him in the bright glare of the public spotlight. He was also a stimulating teacher who had the wonderful knack of making obtuse playgoing pupils think. And many of them objected to that.

"The Apple Cart," as you may recall, has to do with Magnus, a shrewd and civilized English King of the future, who insists on the Royal Prerogative of veto when his cabinet blunders. Prime Minister Proteus will have none of this. Magnus must bow to the will of his advisers, misguided though they often be.

So, the wily monarch threatens to abdicate, stand for Parliament and perhaps eventually oust Proteus and his argumentative, self-anointed colleagues. He even gets the support of a couple of them—women, of course. For Shaw, among other things, was an avowed feminist. Well, that puts Proteus in his place.

• • •

"THE APPLE CART" is really a pair of political discussions, with a sexy romp cleverly spaced between. For Magnus keeps a platonic Pompadour as well as a dull and loyal Queen. Certain theatrical historians have compared these ladies to Mrs. Pat Campbell and Mrs. Shaw. G. B. was a great one for wooing glamorous stars with words, but stopped short of naughty deeds.

Now, the point of it all is this: If you want to give your think-tank a right royal workout, don't miss Charles Adams' and Joseph Neebe's brilliant revival of this sparkling prank at the Plymouth Theatre. But if you're opposed to wise and witty talk—and there's plenty of it—it's just not your dish.

Maurice Evans, too long absent from Broadway, has just the right style to impersonate the clever Magnus. He also has the personality and voice for him. He is even able to sustain, gloriously, a speech that lasts all of six or eight minutes. An acting triumph.

SIGNE HASSO, Charles Carson, Claudia Morgan, Mercer McLeod, Katherine Hynes, Raymond Bramley, Pat Nye, Norman Barrs, George Turner, Guy Spaull, Jack Livesey, Noel Leslie and William Jackson play other roles to the hilt under George Schaeffer's brisk direction. An onrushing deadline prevents individual salutes at this time.

Robert O'Hearn and Noel Taylor have designed sumptuous settings and appropriate costumes for the sophisticated frolic. They must have put a big dent in the Adams-Neebe bankroll.

The new season assumed genuine stature with the advent of "The Apple Cart" Thursday evening. There's no use talking, Shaw was a talky old bird. But what trenchant, provocative exciting talk! We'd rather sit through Shaw at his worst than most of the moderns at their best. And this ain't his worst!

New York Post

October 19, 1956

By Richard Watts Jr.

Shaw's Defense of a British King

"The Apple Cart" is one of Bernard Shaw's most wayward and discursive comedies, and, at the Plymouth Theater last night, I didn't think its production added much to its brightness and sparkle, despite Maurice Evans' familiar expertness in Shavian roles. Nevertheless, garrulous, perverse and stubbornly undramatic as it is, and as lacking in brilliance of performance as it proved to be, it still is a pleasure to hear the most argumentative of playwrights having his witty say and making his dogmatic predictions on the political future, however outrageous they may be.

This, to refresh your memory, is the play, written long before the rumpus that led to the creation of the Duke of Windsor, in which the author predicted a King of England who refused to become a puppet manipulated by his Cabinet and brought the fatuous Prime Minister to terms by the dire threat of abdicating his throne and standing for Parliament. It is also the comedy in which Shaw had the antic notion of showing America staggering the English by offering to tear up the Declaration of Independence and rejoin the British Empire.

Prophet Refuted

Since Edward VIII rather demolished the playwright's prophetic powers by having the British take up his threat to abdicate with considerable enthusiasm, the current sponsors of "The Apple Cart" have tried to get around the entire matter by adding a reference in the text to the gentleman who is now the Duke of Windsor. I can't help thinking this is cheating a bit, just as it is cheating in a more minor way to change the League of Nations to the United Nations in one of the speeches. A playwright who goes in for prophecies should be made to stand by them.

Perhaps, however, I am being a little dogmatic here and my objection is chiefly academic. For the predictions may add a spice to "The Apple Cart," but they are not its most important feature. What is of interest is the sardonic humor of Shaw's witty and incisive mind as he goes about expressing his scorn for conventional political democracy and his curious admiration for dictators, so long as he thinks they are wise and far-sighted. It isn't a trait in him that I admire, but I do think he manages it with his characteristic relish and gift for the provocative.

It is a mark of the Shavian perversity that, in the middle act, the play stops its main argument entirely and goes into an interlude in which the King and his rather platonic mistress quarrel gaily and end by rolling around in combat on the floor. It can be quite a funny scene, but, as Mr. Evans and Signe Hasso played it last night, it seemed rather a sedate antic and merely interrupted the central issue. The episode of the American Ambassador and his mission to rejoin the Empire is an interruption, too, but at least it has the proper note of ironic Shavianism.

Although Mr. Evans handles the King's victorious debate with his foolish Cabinet skillfully, and plays with intelligence throughout, I don't think this is one of his most effective performances. Raymond Bramley portrays the American with the correct vaudeville humor, but Charles Carson hardly makes the Prime Minister a dangerous antagonist to the victorious ruler. The gullible head of the Board of Trade is well played by Mercer McLeod. "The Apple Cart" isn't Shaw at his best, and the production doesn't help enough, but even second-best Shaw deserves appreciation.

New York Herald Tribune

October 19, 1956

THEATER

'The Apple Cart'

By WALTER KERR

WHEN the news came—at the Plymouth Thursday night—that the United States of America had jovially decided to rejoin the British Empire, the Queen of England languorously remarked "What a splendid thing!" and reached for her knitting with a regretful indifference.

• • •

I'm afraid that's pretty much how I felt about the whole impish conceit that producers Charles Adams and Joseph Neebe have brought us once more. It is a splendid thing that Maurice Evans has decided to pause in his managerial occupations and refresh himself with Shaw again. It is a splendid thing that one of Shaw's later and less successful plays, a political fantasia called "The Apple Cart," should be trotted out for another antic inspection and perhaps even serious re-evaluation. And it is certainly fine just to hear these sentences roll, to listen to them pitch and toss toward the point where an irreverent bombshell is sure to explode, to begin smiling before the point has been made because you can hear Shaw winding up to it.

• • •

But in the end, alas, nothing can quite keep you from your knitting. Though Maurice Evans, adrape in braid as a King who is expected to behave like a rubber stamp, lifts his head high and rolls out the reverberating paradoxes with a clarion energy and a caustic force, the words scoop up and down the old roller-coaster without ever coming to a glorious, breathless, delighted stop. We are taken for the ride, as before; but the laughter at the end is largely missing.

I suppose the simple fact of the matter is that "The Apple Cart" is one of the tired plays of a brilliant, indefatigable man, an echo play that uses all of the patterns without finding the punch-lines that will make them dazzling. This isn't to say that the Shaw beard doesn't bob waspishly, and entertainingly, from time to time. There is a brief, impudent defense of the old "divine right" system of ruling, proposing that since there is "a divine spark" in everybody, why shouldn't somebody rule under the claim? There is a fine yearning line in which the monarch envies democratic presidents their absolute power. There are amiable little jests everywhere ("Why shouldn't I shoulder my little popgun of a veto and march up and down with it?") but they go off intermittently at popgun force; they never do swell to a cannonade.

• • •

And I suppose the further simple fact is that if "The Apple Cart" is to be made irresistibly jolly now—it has had a considerable success in London lately—the miracle is apt to be worked not by a superb actor but by a superb vaudevillian, a man with a magician's flair for idle but spectacular tricks. Mr. Evans' performance, good as it is, is not the sort that can be made to substitute for a play.

Let's not dismiss it. The bravura of this King, as he faces and flatters his democratic cabinet is like "an overcrowded third-class carriage," is crisp, lively, and devastating. When Mr. Evans is attributing his regal popularity to the rumor that he is a libertine, the playing is as wry and ironic as the writing. There is, however, the uneasy sense of the photographer's smile as Mr. Evans invades his mistress' den, and a central interlude that is meant as a life-saving romp turns unhappily wan long before King Magnus has been hurled unceremoniously to the floor.

• • •

The lady who headlocks her lover this time around—Shaw has used the device in other plays—is the very handsome Signe Hasso, and Miss Hasso manages whatever is flamboyant in the part very well. Arms outstretched, a feather pen or a long peach handkerchief making circles in the air, she is undeniably alluring. There is a difficulty, though, as she tangles with the complex, trumpet-like sentences; her accent cuts across their marching rhythms and halts them; what fun they contain escapes.

In the supporting company, Charles Carson, Pat Nye, Raymond Bramley, and Mercer McLeod conduct themselves most engagingly, and Robert O'Hearn's gilt-and-crystal settings are just about right. But "The Apple Cart" won't brim over.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

October 19, 1956

A Nice Evening Of Chin Music

By TOM DONNELLY.

I had a pleasant time at "The Apple Cart" (at the Plymouth) but I'm rather hard put to it to say why. This minor Bernard Shaw comedy is almost totally lacking in what would seem to be the essentials. It is innocent of any kind of dramatic focus. It is set approximately in the 1970s, but as a piece of political prognostication it shapes up, at this moment in history, as a home-made firecracker wistfully put on display in a window full of hydrogen bombs.

And it is certainly not very witty, as Shavian wit is measured.

I can only hope to justify my pleasure in it in musical terms. Now there's a key that will serve as well as any. "The Apple Cart" suggests a small musical evening, with gifted artists enthusiastically performing agreeable fragments from the near-classic repertoire in a bright gilt salon.

King Vs. Cabinet.

The first and third acts are concerned with a battle between King Magnus of Britain and his cabinet. There is an unspecified crisis lurking in the background, and the Prime Minister and his associates want the king to sign an ultimatum severely limiting his already far from extensive authority. After numerous displays of craft and bombast, the play ends precisely as it begins, with king and cabinet in an uneasy truce.

The second act is a romp in the boudoir. It goes without saying that a romp in a Shavian boudoir represents a triumph of word over misdeed. The king's mistress is a garrulous charmer, heady with her own perfume, and she can't imagine why the king doesn't simply shoot or drown the queen and elevate his lady to the throne. She feels herself a great personage, and she maintains that greatness is a matter of interior conviction, rather than of exterior demonstration.

Evans as the King.

What has this scene got to do with the other two? Nothing, absolutely nothing.

Let us return to the musical motif. Most of the actors are allowed their solo moments, and all of them acquit themselves admirably. As King Magnus, Maurice Evans rushes through enormous arrangements of words with a crisp vivacity of tone that is wonderfully stimulating, and goes a long way to disguise the fact that what he is saying about the nature of power, and the sordid character of politics, and the "hating and hunting instinct of the voting mob," is political science at the junior college level.

(Even when his cerebral flame is at its lowest, Shaw may be counted on for elegance of syntax. In the bleak expanse of the current Broadway season, a modest Shavian line like the king's "Why may I not shoulder my little popgun of a veto and strut up and down with it for a moment?" falls on the ear with sweep opulence.)

The most affecting passage in the play is an odd one. A lady cabinet member delivers a tirade against a sinister industrial corporation named Breakages, Limited, and, as written by the master, and as feelingly projected by Miss Pat Nye, it comes off as an assault on universal injustice.

Signe Hasso gives the King's mistress a nice tough sparkle, Charles Carson is very good indeed as the Prime Minister, and there are first-rate contributions from Mercer McLeod, Claudia Morgan and the other members of the company.

Journal-American

October 19, 1956

Shaw's Play Rambles on, And on, and--

By JOHN McCLAIN

THERE SEEM TO ME to be two ways to approach Bernard Shaw's "The Apple Cart," which bowed at the Plymouth Theatre last night with Maurice Evans in the starring part. One is to subjugate everything to the memorial words of the great Gael, the other is to dig beneath the endless declamations in the hope of uncovering some dimensional characters. The present production has settled for the former.

For the shape of this offering takes the form of a panel show without a moderator. Evans goes on interminably and brilliantly; he is occasionally taken over by Signe Hasso, with whom he is co-starred, or Mercer McLeod, Charles Carson, Claudia Morgan or Raymand Bramley.

But it is all enunciated with the skillful precision of a baccalaureate—one almost wishes there would be the pause for a "a word from our sponsors."

Not as Criticism

This cannot be offered as a criticism of the performers, but it can be submitted as an instance of the sort of hypnosis which Shaw's heavily loaded utterances can exert on a cast. Brilliant delivery is not enough.

For example, I never was made to feel the urgency of the crisis induced by Bill Boanerges, president of the Board of Trade, or the enormity of the King's dilemma in being called upon to make his decision between an absolute and a constitutional monarchy. And I never was persuaded that Miss Hasso, as the royal mistress, was more than a folded photo torn from a scandal magazine.

When the King says, "You are my Queen, in Fairyland," he says it almost as though he believes it.

The truth is that Shaw's play, however timely (through a series of accidental parallels on the election and the general world upheaval) and with full acceptance of the fact that he finds it almost impossible to write an unprovocative line, is still a static panegyric. If it is to be thoroughly revived, it must be done with more bravura and ingenuity than was apparent last night.

Evans Enigmatic

It is obviously difficult to fault Maurice Evans in any situation involving the English language, and he delivers one eight-minute speech with flawless command. On the other hand, there were times when he appeared to me strangely removed from any sincere interest in the emotional problems at hand.

In this regard I do not think he was given the best possible support by Miss Hasso in Act II; the sublety of the scene is lost in her effort to be audible, in the equally strident histrionics. This moment can be quietly seductive.

The remainder of the cast is capable and competent, although again there are certain reservations about the direction. The American Ambassador, for example, could have been more effective with a less musical-comedy manner.

"The Apple Cart" is a wordy and often meandering evening at best. And this, in my opinion, is not the best.

DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK'S PICTURE NEWSPAPER

October 19, 1956

Maurice Evans Does Slick Best To Make 'Apple Cart' Come Alive

By JOHN CHAPMAN

In Bernard Shaw's "The Apple Cart," which was presented last evening at the Plymouth Theatre, King Magnus is a ruler of England "some time in the future."

After two acts of hassling with his cabinet and one act of rassling with his mistress, the king leaves things where they were—and he left me in status quo, too. Nothing much happened to me all evening.

This is the political comedy which Shaw wrote in 1929 and which was presented here in 1930. It was the work of a talky old man then and it remains so now; but, after sundry theatrical discouragements of recent weeks, it seemed last evening to be positively brilliant.

Most certainly, "The Apple Cart" has been brilliantly produced. As King Magnus, Maurice Evans is at his best—debonair, quick of wit and amazingly capable of tossing off one of the longest speeches Shaw or anybody else ever wrote. There is a supporting company of high quality, and the elegant settings designed by Robert O'Hearn are particularly suited to high comedy.

Miss Hasso Attracts

The comedy itself, though, is only high at points, as when Evans is analyzing the duties and handicaps of being a monarch in a democracy, or when an offensively breezy American ambassador offers to rescind the Declaration of Independence and have this nation assume control of Britain simply by becoming a colony once again.

The deliberate part of the comedy—the unconnected interlude in which Magnus and his mistress have a long but tentative discussion of Sex vs. Marriage—is not very funny, though. Shaw himself didn't think it was very funny. At any rate, this scene was brightened last evening by the presence of Signe Hasso as the mistress. Except for a little too much arm-waving and posturing against pillars, Miss Hasso is an attractive and intelligent comedienne.

Evans' Evening

The cream of Shaw's labored jest comes in the final moments of the play. King Magnus, faced by his cabinet with a showdown as to who shall be boss—himself or the prime minister—announces that he will abdicate, get elected to the House of Commons and become prime minister himself. Thus he will rule his country on a surer political footing. Faced with this threat, the cabinet quickly falls in line and goes back to the old system.

It strikes me that, although the time is in the future, most of Shaw's political discussion is in the past and not too stimulating. The stimulation comes from Evans' sure-footed and completely sophisticated performance, and from the supporting performances of players like Charles Carson, a typical prime minister; Mercer McLeod, a typical labor leader, and Raymond Bramley, an American emissary who is not, I hope, typical.

"Double in Hearts"

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

October 17, 1956

THEATER

'Double in Hearts'

By WALTER KERR

TUESDAY night at the Golden a very pretty blonde named Julia Meade turned, in the course of a psychoanalytic conversation, to the normally expert young light comedian William Redfield and asked him, point-blank, "What is your problem?"

Well, Mr. Redfield's problem is that he is in this play called "Double in Hearts" and somebody has persuaded him to play a drunk scene with his eyes alternately crossed and bulging, his tongue slurping steadily over the corners of his mouth, and his shoes off, and he makes an absolute mess of the one scene no actor is supposed to be able to miss in, and the play is terrible. That's his problem.

Nothing helps, really, though everything is tried. Neva Patterson comes on with her velvet good looks and her wisecracking eyes and she screams, purrs and pouts in exact accordance with the instructions of the script, but that doesn't do the trick. A crafty management took the second-act curtain up while everybody was still out on the sidewalk, and this was a good try, but eventually nearly everybody came back in and saw what was going on. Designer Sam Leve tacked at least two witch-doctor masks to the walls of his modern New York apartment, and voodoo has been known to help in certain theatrical circumstances, but the gods were intractable last night.

Is there nothing to be salvaged from this 'farce comedy' about a man whose analyst has just died, which causes him to 'shack up' with a blonde who is described as extremely intelligent and who thereupon turns down dinner at the Chambord in favor of scrambled eggs at home, which ultimately causes both of them to slam an inordinate number of doors in the faces of his wife and her boy friend?

The actors—including Laurence Hugo, who has not yet been mentioned—are all personable, and can be saved for another day. Apart from that I think only of a few household hints bequeathed us by author Paul Nathan, and I pass them on for what they are worth:

If you are going to put a lily in a bottle of Scotch, put an aspirin tablet in the bottle first.

If you blow directly into your socks before putting them on, they will go on easier.

If you hold a match high above your forehead and extend your lower lip far enough, you can blow the match out.

If you have a hangover, a teaspoon of Worcestershire sauce will burn your mouth.

If you take a poker and poke at a couple of fireplace logs that are clearly not burning, it will cause an electrician on the switchboard to cast a flickering red glow all over you.

If you shatter a vase over a man's head, his eyes will cross and he will now be able to see straight.

If you put a piece of paper in the typewriter, write 'a farce comedy' at the top of it, and then just type, type, type, type, type, somebody will produce it.

"DOUBLE IN HEARTS"

Comedy by Paul Nathan; staged by John Gerstad; setting by Sam Leve; costumes by Natalie Walker; presented by Bernard Straus, Paul Vroom and Adna Karns at the John Golden Theatre, October 16, 1956. The cast:

Henry Waterhouse..... William Redfield
Mack Daniels.... Laurence Hugo
Dinah Lawrence..... Julia Meade
Nan Waterhouse.. Neva Patterson

The New York Times

October 17, 1956

Theatre: Farce Comedy

'Double in Hearts' Bows at the John Golden

By BROOKS ATKINSON

TWO years ago on a hot evening in mid-October "The Tender Trap" opened at the Longacre. Last evening was also unseasonably warm, and, sure enough, "Double in Hearts" opened at the John Golden.

Whenever the thermometer rises above normal at this time of year, look for the farce comedy about the amorous opportunities available to men who live in bachelor apartments in New York City. It is a subject that fascinates sophomores of all ages.

•

"Double in Hearts" is the work of Paul Nathan, although "work" may be too strong a word to use on this occasion. It is the story of a couple of men who toy with romance "over a period of about sixteen hours," as the precise program phrases it, in a shared apartment in the Fifties. In the last act the estranged wife of one of the males conks him with a vase, bringing him to his senses and making it possible for the audience to go home.

•

"Double in Hearts" is equipped with scenery by Sam Leve, costumes (one of them inevitably a filmy négligé) by Natalie Walker and four actors, all of them featured. Since they did not write the lines or invent the situations, they are hereby released on their own recognizances. Better luck next time for everybody, including the public. It's the weather, really.

DAILY NEWS

October 17, 1956

'Double in Hearts' Vulnerable

By JOHN CHAPMAN

The stage is worsening at an alarming pace, and if the trend keeps up there won't be any theatre shortage. This is an appalling prospect, because if there isn't any theatre shortage there will be plenty of room for more plays like "Double in Hearts," which submitted itself to judgment last evening at the Golden Theatre.

This is a four-part comedy by Paul Nathan calling for two male and two female players. It is a substandard sex farce with a few jokes about psychoanalysis heaved in. The jokes are possibly worse than the rest of the play.

I shan't burden you with the plot, which has already been enough of a burden to its author, beyond warning you that it's about two guys and two dolls who are unable to decide for almost three acts how they should pair off—as if anybody else should care a hoot.

Among Those Present

The participants in this macabre frolic are:

William Redfield, who plays an interminable drunk scene as though he had never touched a drop of the stuff in his clean young life.

Laurence Hugo, who plays a bachelor on the make about as convincingly as Peter Pan would make a pass at Wendy Darling.

Julia Meade, a bee-yootiful blonde who, most fortunately, has a well-paid sideline doing TV commercials.

Neva Patterson, an actress of quality who should have known better.

John Gerstad is ticketed with the direction and Sam Leve with the modern apartment setting.

New York Post

October 17, 1956

By Richard Watts Jr.

Comedy of the Slamming Doors

Things were pretty tough around the John Golden Theater last night, where a comedy by Paul Nathan called "Double in Hearts" was having its premiere. It was a startlingly unfunny play to begin with, but it was the sight of four talented performers attempting valiantly to be comic that provided the most upsetting part of the spectacle. Good actors striving to be serious in a bad drama seem luckless enough, but it is far sadder to see them trying to achieve laughter against hopeless odds.

I suppose the first warning came when it was revealed that the two men of the quartet were cast as television people. It may be that the practitioners of the new art medium are actually the most fascinating group of individuals in modern life, but the evidence of the theater is certainly to the contrary. A sizable number of plays dealing with the subject have libeled them cruelly if there is the slightest thing amusing or interesting about them, and "Double in Hearts" is no exception.

The Psychiatrists

Then there is the series of references to the psychiatrists. It seems to be the theory of the new comedy that the merest mention that someone is the subject of their ministrations is enough to send an audience into gales of laughter. When, as a kind of clincher, it is remarked that one of the characters is looking unhappy because he has just buried his psychiatrist, a humorous point of the maddest, gayest kind is supposed to be registered. I saw no proof last night to justify this belief.

Possibly "Double in Hearts" is on surer ground in its contention that there are humorous potentialities in the sight of a beautiful and spectacular girl, who is presumed by everyone to be as dumb as she is gorgeous, and the subsequent revelation that she is a Phi Beta Kappa holder and has read a lot of serious books. This, I thought, resulted in a certain limited amount of comic brightness, but there wasn't enough of it to lift the pall of dullness that hung over the proceedings.

The Doors

The final theory of the play is that a good way to capture laughter is to have the actors constantly slamming doors. I gather it's because there is so much door-slamming that "Double in Hearts" is billed as a "farce comedy," instead of merely as a "comedy." The unfortunate aspect of this theory is that there's a law of diminishing returns here. With each slammed door, the humorous effect decreases, until, by the time the third act arrives, the gravity has become immense.

My impression is that the author, who can write quite a funny line upon occasion, is not entirely to blame for the evening's mishap. John Gerstad, who seems to have staged the play with a sledgehammer, must bear some of the responsibility. Nor do the performers reveal any especial genius as farceurs, although Neva Patterson, who is a fine actress; Julia Meade, who has a sense of humor to go with her beauty, and William Redfield and Laurence Hugo, who have done admirably elsewhere, strive valiantly. I can't say I liked "Double in Hearts."

Daily Mirror

October 17, 1956

Robert Coleman's THEATRE:

'Double in Hearts' Is In Need of Few Aces

• Play is loaded with TV talent but that's its only trump card.

There's an axiom along the Main Stem that a one-set show, with a small cast, spells money in the bank. But, believe us, it's a fallacy. For Barnard Straus, Paul Vroom and Adna Karns popped up with just such a little nifty called "Double in Hearts" Tuesday evening. And it spells Cain's.

That eminent storehouse tycoon always used horses to cart 'em away. He was averse to motor trucks. Tuesday night you could almost hear those fabled steeds neighing prophetically outside the John Golden Theatre, between the sympathetic yacks of the first-nighters, mostly representatives of Television Row.

THE NEW ARRIVAL is loaded with TV talent. And we do mean talent. Julia Meade, Neva Patterson, Willam Redfield and Laurence Hugo can write their own tickets for top air-waves shows. And they have what it takes to please the sponsors and the public.

But author Paul Nathan has set a booby-trap for them. It exploded right in their faces—and in ours, too, for that matter. It rings the changes on beds, booze and big-domes. Ostermoors, giggle water and psycho-analysis this season have become synonyms for cliche.

Nathan is concerned—and he should be — about a would-be Hemingway, driven to the deep thinkers' couches by a domineering wife and an inferiority complex. He takes "happy" pills, chases them down with tiger juice and remains miserable. Till a pal, grabbing a quick soap-opera buck tosses him into the lap of a beeyotiful date.

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BUT ENOUGH of this. You know as well as we do that the over-stimulated cluck falls right back into the clutches of his pop-eyed spouse. She had always predicted that an experience was all he needed to make him interesting. So he had one. And we had one that we want to wipe right out of our memory book.

But we don't want to forget the striking good looks of both Julia and Neva. Who, along with Redfield and Hugo, exhibited amazing skill and courage under fire. With little help from the usually reliable directorial hand of John Gerstad. And in a pretty good Sam Leve set, too.

Many playwrights apparently have come to the conclusion that a rowdy drinking scene offers a sure-fire climax for their masterpieces. Occasionally the formula works. In this instance, however, Nathan has launched his endurance test with the strong stuff instead of keeping John Barleycorn in reserve for last-ditch emergencies.

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SINCE CONSCIENTIOUS aisle-sitters wear the white ribbon to and from openings, we can only wonder if there isn't a plot on foot—here and there—to send us to the gin-mill's at the curtain's final fall. For quarts are being spilled and gulped on stages now-a-nights. The actors are fairly bathing in the stuff, and yet we have to sit soberly out front.

Perhaps it's all for the best. For "Double in Hearts," we are soberly certain, has but a couple of deuces in the hole. And, let's face it, hits have to hold aces.

Journal American

October 17, 1956

New Comedy Follows Old Plot Theme

By JOHN McCLAIN

THERE ARE JUST four characters in "Double in Hearts," a new comedy which opened at the John Golden Theatre last night, and from the moment they appear there is almost no doubt about how they will wind up; it is that ever-loving situation in which a husband strays, only to realize his true devotion to his wife, and by the same convenience the gay blade is impelled into the arms of the beautiful home-wrecker.

Through the ages this same plot has been employed on an average of once a season and, I might add, usually with greater effect.

In the current instance little effort has been made to disguise the stock elements. The curtain goes up on one of those bachelor lairs in "the 50s" with the same grog tray, the ubiquitous telephone, the doors leading into bedrooms, and the convenient back exit. Somebody is a cinch to get drunk, but in this one they waste no time—the hero is loaded when he makes his entrance.

Displays Proof

He is separated from his wife because (get this!) his psychoanalyst has died, and he is now in temporary residence with his friend, a philandering actor. Just in case we don't get the message right away there is a playbill framed on the wall, proclaiming the tenant as the lead in a stock company production of something called "The Irresistible Male." Then, of course, the actor arrives; then the actor's gorgeous date and, finally, the hero's wife.

How the hero gets off with the actor's girl, and how the actor sets his sights on his friend's estranged wife, are matters of little ingenuity. The fact is that it only serves to bring the right couples together in the end, and this, again, is resolved with a notable lack of humor or plausability.

I hoped all along, and in vain, that all four would go off in different directions. It would have been refreshing, since they didn't seem suited to one another anyway.

It is a serious handicap to any actor to be required to make his first appearance as a cross-eyed drunk, doing all the stupid, coy bits with flowers, shoes, and the lot, and it was an even greater chore for William Redfield, the hero, then to be obliged to emerge from his fog and ardently woo his host's dreamboat.

Tough Role

Similarly Laurence Hugo, as the actor-lover, had a tough evening trying to bring some semblance of reality to his sudden infatuation with his friend's wife.

The girls fared little better. Julia Meade is by all odds a shapely and highly decorative addition to any drawing room, but I didn't dig her as a Phi Beta Kappa who saw strange eminence in the sad Mr. Redfield.

And it was depressing to see Neva Patterson, a most competent performer, struggling with the blandishments of the obvious Mr. Hugo.

We are sure to see the likes of "Double in Hearts" with other names and other costumes many times in the future. But it is doubtful that we'll see the present version much longer.